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THE DEPORTATIONS

STATEMENT BY THE
AMERICAN MINISTER TO BELGIUM

Brand Whitlock

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STATEMENT BY THE
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THE Department of State in Washington has issued for publication the following despatch from Mr. Brand Whitlock, American Minister to Belgium, which was written in January :

In order to fully understand the situation it is necessary to go back to the autumn of 1914. At the time we were organising the relief work the Comité National—the Belgian relief organisation that collaborates with the Commission for Relief in Belgium—proposed an arrangement by which the Belgian Government should pay to its own employés left in Belgium, and other unemployed men besides, the wages they had been accustomed to receive. The Belgians wished to do this both for humanitarian and patriotic purposes; they wished to provide the unemployed with the means of livelihood, and, at the same time, to prevent their working for the Germans. The policy was adopted, and has been continued in practice, and on the rolls of the Comité National have been borne the names of hundreds of thousands—some 700,000 I believe—of idle men receiving this dole, distributed through the communes.

The presence of these unemployed, however, was a constant temptation to German cupidity. Many times they sought to obtain the lists of the *chômeurs*, but were always foiled by the claim that under the guarantees covering the relief work the records of the Comité National and its various sub-organisations were immune. Rather than risk any interruption of the *ravitaillement*, for which, while loath to own any obligation to America, the Germans have always been grateful, since it has had the effect of keeping the population calm, the authorities never pressed the point, other than with the burgomasters of the communes. Finally, however, the military party, always brutal, and with an astounding ignorance of public opinion and of moral sentiment, determined to put these idle men to work.

In August, von Hindenburg was appointed to the supreme command. He is said to have criticised von Bissing's policy as too mild; there was a quarrel; von Bissing went to Berlin to protest, threatened to resign, but did not. He returned, and a German official here said that Belgium would now be subjected to a more terrible *régime*—would learn what war was. The prophecy has been vindicated.

The deportations began in October in the Étape, at Ghent, and at Bruges. The policy spread; the rich industrial districts of Hainaut, the mines and steel works about Charleroi were next attacked; now they are seizing men in Brabant, even in Brussels, despite some indications and even predictions of the civil authorities that the policy was about to be abandoned.

During the last fortnight men have been impressed here in Brussels, but their seizures here are made evidently with much greater care than in the provinces, with more regard for the appearances. There was no public announcement of the intention to deport; but suddenly, about ten days ago, certain men in towns whose names are on the list of *chômeurs* received a summons notifying them to report at one of the railway stations on a given day; penalties were fixed for failure to respond to the summons, and there was printed on the card an offer of employment by the German Government either in Germany or Belgium. On the first day, out of about 1500 men ordered to present themselves at the Gare du Midi, about 750 responded. These were examined by German physicians, and 300 were taken. There was no disorder, a large force of mounted Uhlans keeping back the crowds and barring access to the station to all but those who had been summoned to appear. The Commission for Relief in Belgium had secured permission to give to each deported man a loaf of bread, and some of the communes provided warm clothing for those who had none, and in addition a small financial allowance. As, by one of the ironies of life, the winter has been more excessively cold than Belgium has ever known it, and while many of those who presented themselves were adequately protected against the cold, many of them were without overcoats. The men shivering from cold and fear, the parting from weeping wives and children, the barriers of brutal Uhlans, all this made the scene a pitiable and distressing one.

It was understood that the seizures would continue here in Brussels, but on Thursday last, a bitter cold day, those that had been convoked were sent home without examination. It is supposed that the severe weather has moved the Germans to postpone the deportations.

The rage, the terror, and despair excited by this measure all over Belgium were beyond anything we had witnessed since the day the Germans poured into Brussels. The delegates of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, returning to Brussels, told the most distressing stories of the scenes of cruelty and sorrow attending the seizures. And daily, hourly almost, since that time, appalling stories have been related by Belgians coming to the Legation. It is impossible for us to verify them, first because it is necessary for us to exercise all possible tact in dealing with the subject at all, and secondly because there is no means of communication between the Occupations-Gebiet and the Etappen-Gebiet. Transportation everywhere in Belgium is difficult, the vicinal railways scarcely operating any more because of the lack of oil, while all the horses have been taken. The people who are forced to go from one village to another must do so on foot or in vans drawn by the few miserable horses that are left. The waggons of the breweries, the one institution that the Germans have scrupulously respected, are hauled by oxen.

The well-known tendency of sensational reports to exaggerate themselves, especially in time of war, and in a situation like that existing here, with no newspapers to serve as a daily clearing-house for all

the rumours that are as avidly believed as they are eagerly repeated, should of course be considered; but even if a modicum of all that is told is true there still remains enough to stamp this deed as one of the foulest that history records.

I am constantly in receipt of reports from all over Belgium that tend to bear out the stories one constantly hears of brutality and cruelty. A number of men sent back to Mons are said to be in a dying condition, many of them tubercular. At Malines and at Antwerp returned men have died, their friends asserting that they have been victims of neglect and cruelty, of cold, of exposure, of hunger.

I have had requests from the burgomasters of ten communes from La Louvière, asking that permission be obtained to send to the deported men in Germany packages of food similar to those that are being sent to prisoners of war. Thus far the German authorities have refused to permit this except in special instances, and returning Belgians claim that even when such packages are received they are used by the camp authorities only as another means of coercing them to sign the agreements to work.

It is said that, in spite of the liberal salary promised those who would sign voluntarily, no money has as yet been received in Belgium from workmen in Germany.

One interesting result of the deportations remains to be noted, a result that once more places in relief the German capacity for blundering, almost as great as the German capacity for cruelty.

They have dealt a mortal blow to any prospect they may ever have had of being tolerated by the

population of Flanders ; in tearing away from nearly every humble home in the land a husband and a father or a son and brother, they have lighted a fire of hatred that will never go out ; they have brought home to every heart in the land, in a way that will impress its horror indelibly on the memory of three generations, a realisation of what German methods mean—not, as with the early atrocities, in the heat of passion and the first lust of war, but by one of those deeds that make one despair of the future of the human race, a deed coldly planned, studiously matured, and deliberately and systematically executed, a deed so cruel that German soldiers are said to have wept in its execution, and so monstrous that even German officers are now said to be ashamed.